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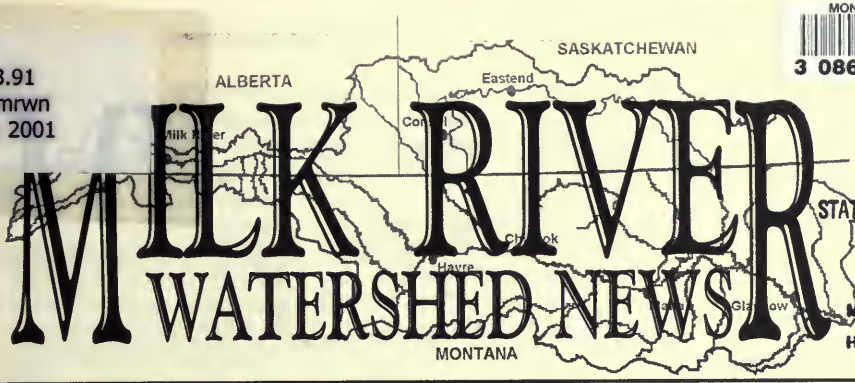

MILK RIVER WATERSHED NEWS

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Joint Board of Control and Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission Approve Fort Belknap Compact

By Mike Dailey

The Milk River Joint Board of Control voted 8-1 to support the Fort Belknap compact after several last minute changes were included to address local concerns. The Montana Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission voted to accept the compact with the new changes on December 6, 2000. The compact will be presented to the 2001 Montana Legislature pending approval by the Fort Belknap Tribal Council. The following article provides more information about issues associated with the compact. ✓

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Final Public Meetings on Fort Belknap Indian Reservation Compact

By Mike Dailey

The Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission (Commission) held four public meetings on the latest draft of the Fort Belknap Compact. The Commission staff wanted to provide the Milk River residents an opportunity to learn about the latest draft and to have time to address concerns. The meetings were held in Chinook, Glasgow, Malta and Havre on November 14-16 and attended by 75 people. Barb Cosens, Legal Council for the Commission told the audiences, "We have a better compact because of the participation by basin residents. The compact evolved from issues raised by the public."

The Commission staff told the audience that it plans to present the Compact to the 2001 Montana Legislature and acknowledges the importance of local support during the legislative session if the Compact is to be approved. The Commission has made it clear that without local support, the Compact would not be presented to the legislature for ratification.

The Commission message was consistent at the public meetings. Staff emphasized the benefits the Compact will bring to the basin residents and water users. According to Cosens, this Compact will provide "certainty" to the basin's water supply. Cosens noted, "The Compact provides a mechanism for resolving disputes. It protects existing junior water rights, and it

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Representatives on the Milk River JBC include the following:

Kay Blatter	Chairman	Fort Belknap Irr. Dist.
Hugh Brookie	Vice-Chairman	Malta Irr. Dist.
Melvin Novak	Secretary	Glasgow Irr. Dist.
Lee Cornwell	Member	Glasgow Irr. Dist.
Jack Gist	Member	Alfalfa Valley Irr. Dist.
Casey Kienenberger	Member	Malta Irr. Dist.
Knute Kulbeck	Member	Harlem Irr. Dist.
Bim Strausser	Member	Paradise Valley Irr. Dist.
Brad Tilleman	Member	Zurich Irr. Dist.
Steve Tremblay	Member	Dodson Irr. Dist.

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tries to mitigate and minimize the impacts of Tribal water rights on existing water users." Cosens, drawing on experiences in other states that quantified Tribal water rights through litigation, stated, "With litigation, the Tribes' water rights still get quantified, but nothing gets done on the ground; the Tribes aren't getting anything they don't already have." Negotiating the Tribes' water rights with the Commission is a cheaper and a fairer process than going through costly litigation.

> "We have a better compact because of the participation by basin residents. The Compact evolved from issues raised by the public."
> **-Barb Cosens, Legal Council for the RWRCC.**

Since the last round of public meetings, the Compact has undergone a number of changes. These changes are a result of public input and issues that were still being negotiated at the time of the last draft. The significant changes to the draft Compact are identified below.

1855 Priority Date

Concerns raised within the Fort Belknap Reservation prompted the change of the Tribes' priority date from May 1, 1888 to October 17, 1855. The U.S. Congress authorized the establishment of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in 1888. The U.S. Federal Government signed a Treaty with the Blackfeet Nation, including the Gros Ventre Tribe in 1855. The Tribes felt that the earlier treaty date more accurately reflects the purpose for which the water rights were established for the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. This change in Tribal priority date did not affect any state water rights on the main stem and because the tributary water rights are protected, they are also unaffected by the change.

Barb Cosens explaining the Fort Belknap Compact in Malta

Additional Tribal Water

The Tribes are entitled to market water from Lake Elwell (Tiber Dam) for off reservation use as part of this settlement. According to Randy Perez, a member of the Tribal negotiating team, the purpose of this Compact provision is to make up water in return for the Tribes' willingness to subordinate its water rights to existing junior water users on upper Peoples Creek. It also provides minor security for state water rights within the Missouri River Basin between Bullwacker Creek and the Musselshell River (Basin 40EJ), and it addresses some of the uncertainty a future Blackfeet water right settlement might pose. "It gives the Tribes the opportunity to market water outside the basin without using Milk River water," said Scott Guenthner of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. The volume of water from Lake Elwell is still being negotiated.

Milk River Coordinating Council

In the latest draft, the authority of the Milk River Coordinating Council—previously called the Milk River Authority— has been scaled back. The Council only has authority to coordinate storage and releases from storage, and prioritize the use of grants and loans. The Council's authority is limited to the mainstem of the Milk River below the Eastern Crossing. It can only expand its authority with the unanimous consent of all Council members. The Council will consist of thirteen members, nine voting and four advisory. Voting members include: two from the Fort Belknap Tribes; three from the Milk River Joint Board of Control; one from Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation; one from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation; one from U.S. Bureau of Indian Affair; and one at large. Advisory members would include: one from the U.S. Geological Survey; one from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service; one from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management; and one from the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

St. Mary Diversion Facilities

All the negotiating parties agree that the long-term operation of the St. Mary diversion facilities is critical for the Compact to be successful. They also recognize that the diversion works are roughly thirty years beyond their designed life expectancy. The Bureau of Reclamation has estimated that the cost to rehabilitate the St. Mary diversion works would range

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OPINION

Dear Communities and Producers of the Milk River Basin:

This letter is devoted to discussion of the Fort Belknap Water Rights compact entered into by the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Tribes of Fort Belknap Indian Reservation and the State of Montana. The Compact Commission, appointed to create and negotiate water compacts, believes their work with the Fort Belknap compact is finished. If and when the Fort Belknap Tribal Council endorses the compact, it will be forwarded to the state legislature for approval.

In this letter, I will express some opinions as well as ask some obvious questions. I cannot explain the intricacies of this compact, simply because there are no short explanations. However, as always, I am available to the public on this subject as well as other public concerns.

Is the Fort Belknap Compact realistic, and will it work?
I believe the mechanics to the compact will work over time. The compact is crafted to address water right allotments to the Fort Belknap Tribes while providing off Reservation mitigation. Mitigation is a descriptive word for additional water storage, delivery system improvement, or other alternatives to make up water losses to non-Tribal water users as a result of the Tribes developing their water rights. Engagement of the compact does not bring immediate change in irrigation practices or allotments. Over time, the compact will create possible changes that will be addressed through mitigation.

What happens if there is not a water compact?
The alternative to a water compact is simply a water right determined by a court of law. For instance, if the irrigators of Fort Belknap Tribes decide that a water compact is not acceptable, the final resolution is the court of law. If determined in the courts, a water right would be established, but mitigation efforts and enhancements or improvements to the basin would not take place. Obviously, the best solution is for the Fort Belknap Tribes and the State of Montana to reach mutual agreement.

The Fort Belknap Tribes have a right to water. The compact has been designed to designate to the Fort Belknap Tribes an allotment of water with logical limitations on the amount.

The Milk River Basin irrigation future is economically tied to the compact. This statement becomes very apparent to producers using the river as a water source versus producers who do not. Tribal and non-Tribal water users must all be able to prosper. Meeting basin needs and successful implementation of the compact will require planning. Meeting the needs of only one or two entities is not acceptable in Northern Montana's Future.
The Milk River Basin is undergoing an organizational transformation. Over the past five years, the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) have become more involved in planning efforts in the Basin. The Fort Belknap Compact has been a driving force in organizing entities in the Basin. With prodding from the BOR and DNRC, the irrigation districts have created the Milk River Project Joint Board of Control (JBC). Formation of the JBC was instrumental in unifying the Milk River Project Irrigation Districts. Additionally, a watershed group called the Milk River International Alliance (MRIA) has formed. The MRIA is a self-appointed, quasi-private group of basin residents and government agencies involved in promoting education, resource planning, and providing local direction to regulatory issues that face the Basin.

As a result of the Irrigation Districts organizing, early in the compact negotiations, the Saint Mary Project came to the forefront. The project needs rehabilitation that may cost over $100 million. Solutions as to how to approach this mega-money-eating project is still forthcoming. Results of the technical work that went into the Compact have given irrigators a reality check. With existing demands on the Milk River, there is no way to meet future expectations without the Saint Mary Project regardless of mitigation. The loss of Saint Mary would economically devastate the basin.

Practically all irrigation water in the Milk River comes from the Saint Mary Project. The rehabilitation of St. Mary is recognized in the compact but not included. We are all on the same boat that leaks. All users of the Milk River will be needed to make Congress aware of our project if it is to be preserved.

A question I sometimes ponder is: *Do all of the players involved in the compact have the foresight to envision the future of the Milk River Basin?* I personally reflect on development to the North of us in the Southern Alberta region. When travelling I see irrigation development, which in turn allows for intensive livestock development. The region reflects this spin-off economic prosperity. The Alberta irrigation development is probably an example of planning, some good fortune, and a working relationship between the private sector and government in various forms.

Should you support the water compact for the Fort Belknap Tribes or the Montana State Legislature?
Answer: That is your decision. I know that so far, most people do support the compact, but are uncomfortable not knowing the absolute impacts. This is a reasonable apprehension, and the water compact addresses this dilemma. The compact contains what I call "haywire clauses" that allows withdrawal from the compact. I do not want to mislead anyone that clauses such as this are just that easy. The point is that in the event the compact is not serving the needs of the basin, or is simply not working, language exists that allows for withdrawal from participation in the compact by the Fort Belknap Tribes or the State of Montana.

I hope interested parties have not come to premature conclusions of this compact. The best approach is to ask for the answers to the concerns that may exist. The compact is needed, and I am available to answer question or assist in the Fort Belknap Compact.

Respectfully,
Rep. Matt McCann

Feasibiltiy Study Looks at Milk River Mitigation Alternatives

By Lenny Duberstein, USBR

The Bureau of Reclamation received funding in November 2000 to begin conducting the North Central Montana Regional Feasibility Study. The study will evaluate water supplies, uses and needs in the St. Mary, Milk and Marias River basins. Efforts will focus on major water-related issues and opportunities to solve these issues.

The study is being coordinated with negotiators who are working to settle the water right claims of the Tribes of the Fort Belknap and the Blackfeet Reservations. Since the negotiations with the Fort Belknap tribes are at an advanced stage, much of the study effort to date has gone into identifying and evaluating several options to mitigate the impacts the proposed settlement might have on folks who are presently using water from the Milk River. This impact is estimated at about 35,000-acre feet less water available for diversions from the Milk River during critical low flow years. Coordination with the Blackfeet Tribe will work toward incorporating potential impacts from settlement of their water rights, which have not yet been identified.

The feasibility study will evaluate costs, benefits, and water quality impacts of proposed measures in enough detail to determine if implementation or construction funding should be pursued. The proposed compact identifies several mitigation options that Reclamation will be looking at in more detail in the feasibility study. These options fall into the following three categories: 1) Improving water management; 2) Increasing water storage in the Milk River Basin; and 3) increasing water supply into the Milk River Basin.

Improved Water Management

This group of options is being looked at to improve the efficiency of water operations and use in the basin.

- On-Farm Water Conservation looks at ways of reducing demands by improving irrigation efficiencies. An irrigation study last year estimated that irrigation efficiencies in the basin are presently around 43 percent and could be improved to about 62 percent. Preliminary analysis indicates that a 5 percent efficiency improvement in the basin would potentially reduce demand by about 25,000 acre-feet at a cost of about $2 million. These early estimates will be looked at more closely since questions have been raised regarding how conserved water will impact basin supplies.

- Canal System Improvements will evaluate ways to deliver water more efficiently. Available data indicates that around half the water diverted from the river flows to the farmer's headgate. More data is needed to verify more accurately where this water is going. These data will also help identify specific options for improving delivery efficiencies such as improved water measurement, monitoring and automation of check gates, lining and piping of canals or laterals, regulation reservoirs, etc. These improvements will be evaluated to determine their potential effect on water supplies and the environment of the basin.

- River System Management will be evaluated to see if there are better ways of monitoring and controlling river flows to better match water needs. A considerable amount of unused water flows out of the basin each season. Additional gaging stations, like the one installed at Cree Crossing by Nelson Reservoir will be considered along with remote operation of some diversion dam and canal gates to see if some of the unused flows can be utilized.

- The Nelson Pumping Plant option will look at catching some of the unused flows of the Milk River by pumping them up 70 feet in elevation to Nelson Reservoir. A range of sizes from 6 to 150 cfs are being looked at, with estimated costs ranging from about $500,000 to $4.5 million, respectively. This plan may increase water supplies to canal diversions by up to 28,000 acre feet during critical years and also provide benefits for the Piping Plover, which is listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a threatened species. A closer look at daily river flows is needed to determine an appropriate pumping plant size.

- A "water marketing" concept for the basin, which would allow for water trading among willing sellers and buyers, will be explored. Several options will be explored including: 1) Purchasing water in dry years from willing irrigators; 2) Purchasing water on a permanent basis from willing irrigators; and 3) Developing an open market for trading water throughout the basin, allowing the price to vary according to what people are willing to pay.

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Additional Water Storage in the Milk River Basin

This set of options looks at ways to increase the use of water by building additional storage facilities in the basin.

- Enlarging the storage capacity at Fresno Reservoir is being evaluated. Fresno Reservoir is filling with about 500 acre-feet of sediment per year. Storage capacity, originally 130,000 acre-feet, has shrunk to about 93,000 acre-feet. Preliminary studies show that the cost for raising the dam will be around $30 to $40 million, due in part to the need to modernize the facility. There appears to be little benefit of an enlarged reservoir during critical years when there may not be water to fill it, but the future loss of capacity to sedimentation has to be considered.

- The plan to increase storage of Nelson Reservoir includes constructing a dike across a narrow section of the reservoir, forming two reservoirs and raising the water surface of the upper reservoir by approximately 15 feet. The cost is estimated at $8 million. Initial model runs indicated little benefit from increased storage at Nelson, but reduced storage capacity at Fresno Reservoir had not been considered.

- Construction of new storage facilities on tributaries to the Milk River is being considered on Peoples, Beaver and 30 Mile Creeks. So far preliminary work has been done assessing the potential benefits of a 30,000 acre-feet capacity reservoir on lower Peoples Creek. Preliminary costs are estimated at about $31 million showing benefits of 4,500 acre-feet in critical years. The other sites will also be looked at.

The United States Geological Survey installed this new gage to measure Milk River flows at Cree Crossing near Saco.

Alternatives to augment the water supply in the basin

- Several options for augmenting or transporting additional water into the Milk River Basin have been evaluated in the past. Three of these alternatives, Missouri River at Virgelle to the Milk by Havre (Virgelle), Duck Creek on Fort Peck Reservoir to Glasgow Canal at Vandalia, and Tiber Reservoir to the Milk River above Havre will be updated. Updated cost for a 175, 200, and 230 cfs Virgelle Pumping Plant and Canal have been calculated with costs in the $50 to $60 million range. Additional work is needed to quantify the benefits of these options. Arsenic is a major concern with these alternatives since arsenic levels are higher in the Missouri River than in the Milk River and these alternatives may violate State water quality standards. Transporting water from Tiber Reservoir will be more costly, but may be more acceptable.

- Rehabilitation of the St. Mary Canal has been identified as essential to the permanent success of the Fort Belknap Compact and to the continued irrigation of lands on the Milk River. Features of the canal, including the diversion dam and headworks, siphons and drop structures, were constructed in the early part of the century and are in need of replacement. Over time the canal capacity has reduced to around 660 cfs, from original designs of 850 cfs. The cost of rehabilitation of the canal, which will include measures to address environmental impacts on the St. Mary River, is estimated to be around $90 million for a system that would provide more than half the water supply for the Milk River during critical years.

Work on the feasibility study is only beginning. We expect that several additional alternatives will be identified and evaluated over the two-year schedule for the study. Public scoping sessions will be scheduled this spring so that people in the region can provide input and direction to our work. As we learn more we anticipate that early estimates of costs and benefits will change. ✓

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between $100 million to $200 million. The negotiating parties acknowledged that they can neither predict nor dictate Congressional action to rehabilitate the diversion facilities. But they fear that if the cost of rehabilitating the St. Mary Diversion were included in the Compact, the chances of ratifying the compact by the Congress would be diminished considerably. A parallel process will be initiated by the negotiation parties, which include the United States, the Blackfeet Nation, and the Milk River Project water users to seek authorization and funding for rehabilitation of the St. Mary diversion works. The compact should increase awareness within Congress of the need to rehabilitate the St. Mary diversion works.

> "I guess my greatest concern is our ability to opt-out of the Compact if conditions in the compact aren't being met."
> **-Mel Novak, President of Glasgow Irrigation District.**

The Uncertainties

Although the Compact brings certainty to the reserved water rights of the Fort Belknap Tribes, in other respects, it brings uncertainty. Fear of the future also accompanies change.

Many of the concerns raised in the public meetings have been addressed in last minute changes to the compact after talks between the Joint Board of Control and the Commission. The challenge is for Commission staff to find acceptable solutions to the following issues in order to draw more public support for the compact.

Water users listening to Commission staff discuss the proposed Fort Belknap Compact in Chinook.

Mitigation Projects are not Specifically Outlined

Some basin residents are concerned that the Compact did not identify specific measures to mitigate the effects of the tribal water rights. They want assurance that Congress would authorize and appropriate adequate funding to construction the mitigation measures. The Commission staff identified a number of issues and problems with "locking in" on specific mitigation projects at this time. The negotiating parties did not feel they should be the ones selecting the mitigation projects. They believe that the Bureau of Reclamation should recommend the appropriate mitigation measures after completing its feasibility studies. Four million dollars has been granted to the Bureau of Reclamation from the Rocky Boy Compact to conduct feasibility and environmental studies on a number of mitigation options within the Milk River Basin. Only after these studies are completed, will information be available for selecting the appropriate mitigation measures. Cosens cited problems with the Animas - La Plata Project in Colorado that was included in the Southern Ute Tribal Compact. " This project had been authorized and funded," Cosens stated, "but after the environmental review process was completed, the project as designed was determined to be unfeasible."

HYDROSS Model

HYDROSS is a water accounting model that was developed by the Bureau of Reclamation to estimate how water supplies are used and managed within western river basins. The model is being used in the St. Mary and Milk River Basins to assess the effects of developing the Tribes' reserved water rights on existing water users and the amount of water that would be made available by the different mitigation projects. There has been a number of questions on the information used in the model. The model has estimated that 35,000 acre-feet of water would be needed each year to mitigate the development of the tribal water right. The Commission staff contends that the results from the model can only be used as a relative measure of the effects of the Tribal water right and cannot be considered as a precise volume. The Bureau of Reclamation will have a better grasp of this number after completing the feasibility studies. To alleviate these fears, the negotiating parties added language to the Compact to ensure that, at least 35,000 acre-feet per year would be the amount of water that must be mitigated, and that if the Bureau's studies show

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Milk River International Alliance Applies for Federal Grant

By Paul Azevedo

In November 2000 the Milk River International Alliance (MRIA) applied to the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) for project funding available through section 319 of the Federal Clean Water Act. The 319 funds, which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency grants to the states, are intended to support local watershed efforts. The MRIA is seeking funding support to begin addressing some of the natural resource concerns identified at the 1999 Milk River Know Your Watershed educational workshop. The funds will be used to complete a two-year data collection and education effort known as the Milk River Watershed Project. The goals of this project are as follows:

Complete a natural resource assessment to provide baseline data on water quality, water quantity, weeds, and riparian health.

- Information collected will allow local residents and natural resource managers to prioritize resource concerns and begin developing alternatives to address the concerns.

Implement practices to improve natural resource conditions in the basin.

- Work with Conservation Districts, Irrigation Districts and willing landowners to implement locally crafted best management practices (BMP) demonstration projects designed to enhance water quantity and water quality in the basin.

Provide information and education for Milk River Basin residents.

- Implement educational and outreach programs designed to increase local knowledge and understanding of the importance of water quality and quantity to all basin residents.

The total project budget is estimated to be $441,780 over two years. The MRIA has requested $112,500 from the 319-grant program. State and local ($185,600), and federal ($143,680) matching funds and in-kind services cover the remainder of the budget. In-kind contributions and matching funds do not require any local, state, or federal organization, or agency to expend additional funds in support of the project. Matching funds and in-kind contributions account for, and give credit to, all the individuals, organizations, and agencies that are actively working in the watershed. For example:

- Water conservation plans developed and implemented by local irrigation districts and the Bureau of Reclamation;
- A landowner who donates the use of a tractor to complete a BMP project;
- Time spent by the local Extension Agent educating producers on issues that affect their operations; and
- Time spent by local citizens who may wish to become involved in organizing a watershed festival.

If the MRIA's proposed project is selected for funding the work will began in the fall of 2001. ✓

D·I·D· Y·O·U· K·N·O·W·

The shoreline of Fort Peck Reservoir is longer than the coastline of California.

The longest free flowing river in the lower 48 states is the Yellowstone River

Flathead Lake is the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi.

If you have ideas for articles or news items, please contact:

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more water is needed, this number will be increased accordingly.

Milk River Irrigation Project Could Bear the Brunt of the Impacts

There is a feeling among many main stem water users that the Milk River Project will bear the brunt of the impacts of the settlement while the Compact protects the tributary water users. The project water users have felt that all beneficiaries of the project should pay. The Commission has worked extensively with the Joint Board of Control to ensure that the Milk River Project will not be hurt by the development of the Tribes' water rights.

Ability to Opt-out of the Compact

The Governor has the authority to withdraw from the Compact. "I guess my greatest concern is our ability to opt-out of the Compact if conditions outlined in the Compact aren't being met," said Mel Novak, President of Glasgow Irrigation District. Several irrigators voiced their worries over the actual withdrawal language in the Compact. They wanted to make sure that they had the ability to opt-out of the Compact if their water needs were not satisfied, as they existed before the compact was ratified. These irrigators questioned whether their voices would be heard. Cosens assured them that there is no way to predict what a person will do, but it is rather unlikely that the Governor would act unilaterally on such an important issue. The Compact language was changed. It now requires the Governor to consult with the affected water users, including the Milk River Joint Board of Control before deciding whether to opt-out of the Compact.

Historic Treaty Rights

A committee of Gros Ventre Tribal members is concerned with the historic treaty rights. They feel that the Fort Belknap Indian community has no legal authority to [illegible]n behalf of the Gros Ventre [illegible]is is a treaty matter, and not a matter for the Fort Belknap Indian community," said Harold Main, Gros Ventre Tribal member. He further stated, "the southern end of the reservation is getting ignored in this Compact." According to Randy Perez, the Tribal Constitution and bylaws give the Tribes the right to vote for council members and this gives the Tribal Council the authority to negotiate on behalf of the Fort Belknap Indian community. "It's the responsibility of each tribe to deal with their treaty rights," said Perez. ✓

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Legislature and Governor Approves Compact

By Joan Speckling, Reserved Water Rights Compact Commision

The Fort Belknap Compact passed the Montana Legislature with a strong majority and was signed into law by Governor Martz on April 16, 2001. Representative Matt McCann of Harlem sponsored the bill. The compact settled the reserved water rights of the Gros Ventre and Assinoboine Tribes on the Fort Belknap Reservation. The Compact was supported by the Milk River Joint Board of Control, Milk River International Alliance, water users groups, the Fort Belknap Indian Community, the State of Montana and the Montana Water Resources Association. Opposition came from the Gros Ventre Treaty Comittee and representatives of the Blackfeet Nation. The successful outcome took fifteen years of hard work and tough negotiations from the Fort Belknap Indian Community, the State of Montana and the United States federal government.

The next step is for the negotiators to continue working on defining the measures needed to mitigate the effects of the tribal water rights on existing water users and to determine who will pay for these new projects. The information will be included in a bill that will be submitted to US Congress. If the federal legislation passes, the compact will be presented to the Tribes for a referendum vote. If passed, it will then be submitted to the Montana Water Court for inclusion into the appropriate water right decrees.

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Irrigation Water Supply will be Short

By Scott Guenthner, USBR

This may be a tough year for irrigators in the Milk River. Many of you may recall the poor water supply conditions of last year. Releases from Fresno Reservoir were discontinued on August 14 and water storage was nearly depleted in Sherburne, Fresno and Nelson reservoirs by September. The relatively mild winter of 2000-2001 has made conditions worse as the surrounding plains and Mountains that feed water to the Milk and St. Mary rivers received below average snow accumulation. Since January, water managers and Milk River water users have been concerned about the re-occurrence of another year of drought.

The Milk River Joint Board of Control met with the Bureau of Reclamation on March 20 in Malta to discuss the available water supply. The runoff for the April through July period is expected to be less than 20 percent of

(Continued on Page 2)

Representatives on the Milk River JBC include the following:

Kay Blatter	Chairman	Fort Belknap Irr. Dist.	**Casey Kienenberger**	Member	Malta Irr. Dist.
Hugh Brookie	Vice-Chairman	Malta Irr. Dist.	**Knute Kulbeck**	Member	Harlem Irr. Dist.
Melvin Novak	Secretary	Glasgow Irr. Dist.	**Bim Strausser**	Member	Paradise Valley Irr. Dist.
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(Irrigation Water continued from Page 1)

normal for the Milk River and less than 45 percent of normal for the St. Mary River. The Joint Board of Control, who represent eight irrigation districts in the basin and about 80 percent of the irrigated acreage, agreed to delay starting the irrigation season until May 15. This delay would allow water to be moved between reservoirs so that more demands could be met once irrigation deliveries began. The water supply expected to be available at the water users' headgates will amount to approximately 0.9 acre-feet of water for each acre of irrigated land. This is less than half the normal water supply.

Water users remember and often recall the dry years of 1977, 1985, and 1988. Figure 1 compares drought conditions for 1977,1985,1988 and projected conditions for 2001 for:

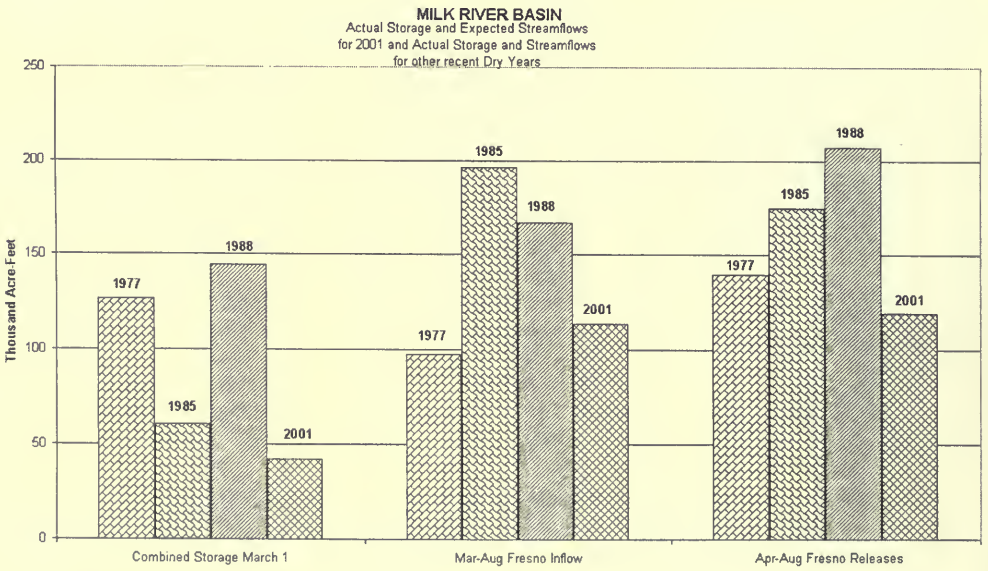
1) the combined storage in Sherburne, Fresno and Nelson Reservoirs on March 1;
2) total March through August inflows into Fresno Reservoir; and
3) total releases from Fresno Reservoir for April through August for 1977, 1985, 1988, and those ex pected for 2001.

As you can see from Figure 1, combined storage in the three reservoirs and releases from Fresno should be worse this summer than in the other three drought years. Only in 1977 were inflows into Fresno projected to be worse.

A major storm brought more than 20 inches of snow to some areas in the headwaters of the Milk River near Glacier National Park during the first week of April. This unexpected weather delayed the start-up of the St. Mary Canal by at least 10 days causing a further delay in transferring much needed water to the Milk River Basin. This delay has also resulted in a reduction in the amount of water transferred to Nelson Reservoir. All of these factors could result in a further delay in the irrigation season. The Milk River Joint Board of Control will reconsider the start of irrigation on or before May 15. This year, the location and timing of delivery of the water supply may be more important than the actual amount of water delivered.

Overall, water supply conditions improved during April, but not enough to increase the expected water supply above the 0.9 acre-feet of water per acre of land. Unless timely, above average rainfall occurs across the basin from May through early July, water supplies may be fully depleted by mid to late July. ✓

FIGURE 1.



What Does The Fort Belknap Compact Say?

By Rich Moy, DNRC

Tribal Water Right

Milk River

The Fort Belknap Tribes are entitled to divert the first 645 cubic feet per second (cfs) of natural flow from the Milk River. The Tribes, however, are only entitled to the U.S. share of the Milk River as defined under the 1909 Boundary Waters Treaty between the U.S. and Canada. To preserve historic irrigation on the reservation, the Tribes are entitled to continue diverting up to 125 cfs of this amount for irrigating 10,425 acres. The remaining 520 cfs may be diverted for direct use or stored in an off-stream reservoir for irrigating an additional 19,390 acres on the reservation. Up to 4,000 acre-feet per year of the 520 cfs can be used for purposes other than irrigation. The off-stream reservoir project is limited to maximum storage capacity of 60,000 acre-feet.

Peoples Creek

The Tribes are entitled to all the water in Peoples Creek after the existing water rights upstream of the reservation are satisfied. The Tribes are also entitled to construct a reservoir on the reservation to keep water instream for stockwatering, fisheries, and recreation.

Beaver Creek

The Tribes are entitled to continue irrigating the 2,241 acres that have been irrigated historically, to build small stock water impoundments in the basin, and to irrigate 180 more acres.

Missouri River Basin (40EJ)

The Tribes are entitled to continue using water for stock, domestic uses and to build small impoundments for stock watering on the reservation. Water rights that have been acquired with the purchase of land off the reservation are recognized in the compact, but will be administered by State law.

Groundwater

All existing groundwater uses on the reservation are protected. Any new groundwater use that is determined to be connected to surface water is counted against the Tribal surface water rights as described above. Groundwater that is not connected to surface water can be developed unless existing water users would be adversely affected. Small wells of 35 gallons per minute (gpm) or less are exempted from the provisions of the compact and can be developed.

Priority Date of the Tribal Water Right

The priority date of the Tribal water right is October 17, 1855 based on the date the Stephens Treaty was signed between the United States and the Blackfeet Tribes. The Gros Ventre Tribe was a party to the Treaty. Water use on the tributaries of the Milk River that are upstream of the reservation are protected from a call by the Tribes. But if the Tribes cannot satisfy their water rights from the natural flow of the Milk River, they have the ability to call water to be released from Fresno Reservoir. The proposed mitigation measures (discussed below) are to provide a more certain water supply to the existing water users after the tribal water right is developed

Administration

The Tribes are entitled to administer the tribal water right. They will establish a process for recognizing water rights allocated to allotted land and for fee land within the reservation. The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs will continue to administer the BIA projects. Irrigation companies will continue to administer those BIA projects that have been transferred to them. The U.S.

(Continued on Page 5)

FRESNO RESERVOIR

Bob Larson of the DNRC standing within Fresno Reservoir. Only 8,087 acre-feet of water was in the reservoir on April 27. St. Mary's water was predicted to arrive in Fresno Reservoir by May 15.

EDITORIAL

The Need For Combined Efforts

By Kay Blatter

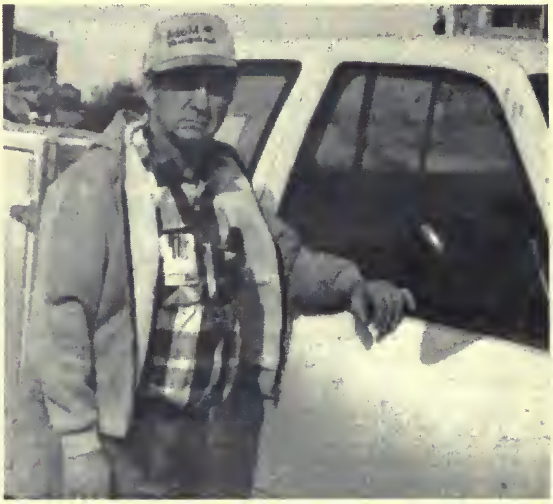
As I sit here in my kitchen, I am enjoying the light rain that is falling. I am always giving thanks for the wonderful moisture that falls, especially to the west of us for it fills our reservoirs, but also to the rain that quenches the thirst of thousands of acres of grass land and cropland both here and for our neighbors to the north. I'm sure the moisture is the result of a lot of prayers by a lot of wonderful people in the Milk River drainage of Montana, Alberta and Saskatchewan. It is the combined effort that counts.

I can't help but think what happens when we all work together. This brings to mind the successful workshop that was organized by folks from Alberta, Saskatchewan and Montana and held in January 1999 in Havre. The workshop and its video entitled "*The Milk River: International Lifeline of the Hi-line*" helped us better understand each other's needs for water from the Milk River and its tributaries.

The tour that was sponsored by the Milk River International Alliance (MRIA) was also a combined effort. We had a chance to visit the St Mary diversion dam, siphon and canal project, Sherburne Dam, and several projects in southern Canada. This joint Canadian/US sponsored tour helped not only to promote a better understanding of each others water needs, but good will between us and our neighbors to the north.

Since the organization of the MRIA on March 25, 1999, our Canadian neighbors have attended several meetings, and helped and cooperated on a number of projects. They assisted greatly with the irrigation tour. In the mission statement of the MRIA are the words "collaboration and coordination", but again, to me it is the combined effort that is the key for improving water management in the basin. Local people are just starting to realize the daunting challenges we face in moving water from Sherburne Dam through nearly 1,000 miles of river channel and canal before it reaches Glasgow. The cost of current O& M, cost of upgrading the canal system, endangered species such as Bull trout, public relations, etc are all challenges that we must face together.

I feel the overall goal of the MRIA is to get as many people as we can from different interests together. They include irrigators, and those folks interested in water sports, fisheries, hunting, wildlife and even people not interested in the above activities but are concerned about the communities and people that live in and along the Milk River. We need to meet together and work for the good of not only the basin, but also the people that live there (as Maido McCartney used to say in her "Chinook Hour" on KOJM radio, "The Dear Hearts and Gentle People").



Kay Blatter

The members of the MRIA have made mistakes as we try to begin addressing issues and concerns in the basin and for these mistakes we ask for your forgiveness and understanding. Let's move forward for the good of the people of the basin and again with combined efforts.

The Milk River Joint Board of Control was organized in July 1999 after a lot of agonizing discussion and meetings. I feel the Joint Board of Control has been a tremendous asset to the eight irrigation districts and the Fort Belknap Tribes. Through a combined effort of working together, meeting, and discussing issues, we are feeling more comfortable about talking things out and bringing up problems. We are learning how to achieve consensus as to what needs to be done and then to get on with it.

I greatly appreciate everyone's willingness to

(Continued on Page 5)

(Combined Efforts, continued from Page 4)

serve on the Joint Board and for the time they have dedicated to accomplish the work of the river and basin. For without them, the Board of Control wouldn't work. I know everyone has farms or ranches of their own to take care of and some have other jobs as well. I know, I was there. I feel their involvement in the Joint Board of Control and in the negotiations of the Fort Belknap compact has made a lot of difference in the overall outcome of the compact and will be a great advantage to us if we stay involved and keep current. I also feel that the continued involvement of the various state and federal agencies with the Milk River Joint Board of Control is important. They help write grants and obtain funding to help us solve some of our challenges.

It is my hope that we can continue our combined efforts through the entire Milk River Basin and across the border to preserve the lifestyle that we have come to love and appreciate. We need to maintain the quality and quantity of this lifestyle so that it will be here for years to come for the benefit of our grandchildren and their grandchildren. ✓

Kay Blatter is chair of both the Joint Board of Control and the Milk River International Alliance.

(Compact continued from Page 3)

Bureau of Reclamation will continue administering its water service contract for water from the Milk River Project. The State will continue to administer state-based water rights.

Milk River Coordinating Committee

The Milk River Coordinating Committee has the responsibility:
1) to coordinate storage and the release of water from the Milk River project to the various user groups; and
2) to implement a grant and loan program to improve water use efficiencies in the Milk River Basin and to establish a water bank during periods of drought.
The Committee is composed of representatives of the Tribes, the Milk River Joint Board of Control, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

Dispute Resolution

Water commissioners will be appointed by state court judges to enforce the distribution of water from the Milk River. A Compact Board is established to resolve those disputes within the Milk River Basin (that do not fall under authority of the water commissioners) and within Peoples and Beaver Creeks and a portion of the Missouri River Basin (40EJ). A process is established in the compact for assuring that all changes in use of the tribal water right or a state-based water right, do not adversely impact other water rights.

New Tribal Development

New Tribal water developments are anticipated in the compact. Funding and authorization for each tribal project must be obtained from the U.S. Congress.

Non Tribal Mitigation Projects

To help protect the availability of existing water supplies for non-tribal water users, the Compact contemplates improvements to the Milk River Project such as increasing storage and improving the operation of existing storage facilities. Because the Milk River Project is a federal project, Congressional authorization and funding will be required. A cost share arrangement will need to be established between the State of Montana and the United States.

Cop-out Provision

The Compact allows Montana's Governor, on behalf of the water users, to withdraw from the Compact if mitigation measures are not ultimately agreed to, authorized, funded, and built.

Rehabilitation of the St Mary Diversion Works and Canal

The negotiators realized the importance of rehabilitating the St. Mary River diversion works and canal system. But after much discussion, it was felt that this issue should not be included in the Compact. A better approach for rehabilitating the project would be to develop and support separate federal and state legislation. The parties to the Compact have agreed to work together with the Blackfeet Tribe and the Milk River Irrigation Districts to determine the most appropriate means for ensuring the viability of the St. Mary's diversion works and canal system. ✓

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Graphic Designer: Devri Roubidoux

Southwestern Saskatchewan Irrigation Tour Planned

By Marc Cross, DNRC Havre

The Milk River International Alliance in cooperation with Sask Water of Saskatchewan is scheduling a tour of the eastern tributaries of the Milk River in Saskatchewan on June 18 and 19th, 2001. Tour highlights will include a Cypress Lake Irrigation Demonstration Project, which involves intensive alfalfa management for yield and quality, an overnight stay at the beautiful Cypress Hills Park, and tours of the Battle Creek and Frenchman River irrigation projects.

Participation will be limited to the first 15 Montana irrigators who apply. In an effort to minimize costs to participants, the Milk River International Alliance is applying for a State Irrigation Development Grant from the Conservation and Resource Development Division of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

If you are interested in attending the tour contact either Shilo Messerly, NRCS, Malta, 654-1334, ext. 104 or Marv Cross, DNRC, Havre, 265-5516. ✓

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Low Water Supply Spurs Improved Management

By R. Scott Guenthner, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

The water supply during 2001 has not been good in the Milk River Basin, with the exception of the Glasgow area, which experienced above average rainfall again this summer. Water users remember and often recall other dry years in the recent past; years like 1977, 1985, and 1988. Water year 2001 will now be included in that group. Irrigators, the recreation public, and municipalities all experienced adverse impacts this year.

Even the water users of the Fort Belknap Indian Irrigation Project, with the most senior water rights in the basin, felt the impacts of below normal water supply. Besides receiving less water, irrigators within the Fort Belknap Indian Irrigation Project had to change their normal irrigation practices. They are entitled to receive water from both direct flow water rights and from storage in Fresno Reservoir. This year, the Fort Belknap Indian Irrigation Project canal began diverting water on March 22. The canal was started much earlier than normal at the encouragement of Project water users. They realized that natural direct flow of the river, of which they are entitled, might not be available if they waited. The operating plan of the Project was to divert only the natural flow of the river originating downstream of Fresno Dam for the first irrigation, and store the natural flow originating upstream of Fresno Dam in Fresno Reservoir. Under this plan, the Project only received credit for one-seventh of the natural flow stored in Fresno Reservoir, but would allow for a second irrigation later in the year. The Reclamation Milk River Project water users were credited with six-sevenths of the natural flow that was stored in Fresno Reservoir. At one point during the season, the Ft. Belknap Indian Irrigation Project canal diversion was reduced at the request of downstream irrigators to allow water to flow down the river. The Project canal was shut down on June 9. The Fort Belknap Indian Irrigation Project had stored water left in Fresno Reservoir at the end of July

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Representatives on the Milk River JBC include the following:

Kay Blatter	Chairman	Fort Belknap Irr. Dist.	**Casey Kienenberger**	Member	Malta Irr. Dist.
Hugh Brookie	Vice-Chairman	Malta Irr. Dist.	**Ralph Snider**	Member	Harlem Irr. Dist.
Melvin Novak	Secretary	Glasgow Irr. Dist.	**Bruce Anderson**	Member	Paradise Valley Irr. Dist.
Lee Cornwell	Member	Glasgow Irr. Dist.	**Brad Tilleman**	Member	Zurich Irr. Dist.
Jack Gist	Member	Alfalfa Valley Irr. Dist.	**Steve Tremblay**	Member	Dodson Irr. Dist.

Reclamation Begins Canal Efficency Study

By Lenny Duberstein, Bureau of Reclamation

Rain fell and mud flew the first week in June as the Milk River Canal Efficiency study got off to a slippery start. Three hydrologic technicians, Chuck Hewitt, Deb Pankratz, and Elizabeth Fisher had just been hired by the Milk River Joint Board of Control (JBC) and were being trained, in the rain, on the techniques of water measurement. Chuck, Deb and Elizabeth will be working in the Chinook, Malta and Glasgow areas respectively.

Deb Pankratz, Elizabeth Fisher and Chuck Hewitt, learn how the Hydromet system works, from Fresno Dam Operator Brad Bender.

Late last winter the JBC and the U. S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) discussed the need to take a closer look at water use along the river. Although the state and Reclamation have performed many studies of the Milk River over the years, very little reliable data exists that provides an understanding of where water in the basin is going, how it is being used, and how the system could be managed better. This joint effort between the JBC and Reclamation not only provides important information in a low water years like this, but helps guide pivotal decisions affecting the future of the basin, which may be coming shortly.

This spring the Montana Legislature and the Governor approved the Fort Belknap Compact to settle the reserved water rights of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Tribes. Water on the Milk River is already in short supply. Providing additional water to the Reservation while meeting the needs of existing non-tribal users will likely require improvements to the Milk River Project and canal systems. While the compact mentions several potential "mitigation" measures (e.g. water conservation, improved river operation and use of storage facilities, water-banking etc.), specific measures have yet to be determined. Reclamation will examine these and other measures as part of the ongoing North Central Montana Regional Feasibility Study. Accurate information on the operations and water budgets of the canal systems is needed to identify which improvements will be the most economical, while best meeting basin needs.

The Canal Efficiency Study is intended to go for

(Continued on Page 5)

(Low Water Supply Continued from Page 1)

according to Bureau of Reclamation accounting. This water will be used during a brief period in August.

One of the significant developments in the basin this year was the appointment of a water commissioner for the Milk River. District Judge John C. McKeon of the 17th Judicial District appointed a water commissioner upon a petition filed by the Glasgow Irrigation District. The water commissioner began measuring and distributing stored water released from Fresno and Nelson Reservoirs. The water commissioner was also asked to measure and distribute stored water along the Milk River mainstem between Nelson Reservoir and Vandalia Diversion Dam. Rainfall in the Glasgow Irrigation District service area has so far made it unnecessary for the water commissioner to measure and distribute stored water. Streamflows and weather conditions during August will determine if the water commissioner will have to take action. The importance of this action may not provide significant improvements of the water supply this year. However, knowing that it is possible to have a water commissioner appointed without the presence of a final water right decree could lead to the routine appointment of a water commissioner for the entire length of the Milk River below Fresno Reservoir.

Water short years such as the present year are extremely frustrating for water users who feel the direct impacts of a reduced water supply. However, lessons learned this year like changes in timing of water use, improved cooperation among water users, and appointment of a water commissioner could lead to improved water use and water distribution in future years. ✓

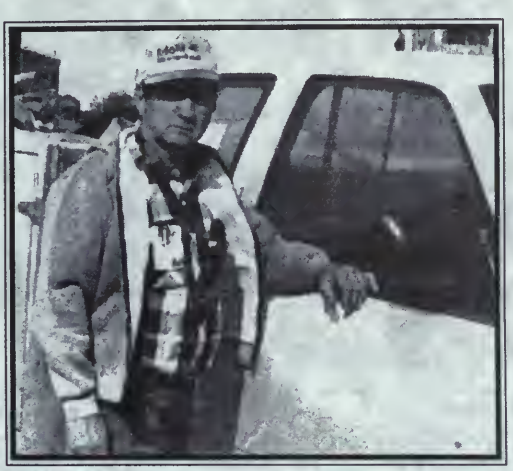
OPINION

A Tough Year with a Few Bright Spots

By Kay Blatter

TOUGH YEAR

By the time this article hits the press, irrigation water will have been shut off and the Milk River will become a very low and dry stream until next spring. A lot has happened but not much water under the bridge. From what I've been able to determine from visiting with folks around the area, it certainly hasn't been a banner year for income from agriculture. However the water supply situation turned out slightly better than it appeared last spring. Hopefully we'll get some good fall rain, and lots of snow on the prairie and in the mountains this winter.



Kay Blatter

Mother Nature has dealt us a tough water year, but farmers in the Klamath Falls, Oregon area are in really tough shape. Having endangered species in our project area, irrigators on the Milk River Project are watching this situation closely. The two questions that come to mind are what can we learn from Klamath Falls, and how can we avoid a similar fate? It disturbs me, and I don't have the answers, but what is clear, is water short years and situations like this, highlight the competition for limited resources. It also underscores the importance of finding middle ground to resource problems before they reach a flash point.

CANADIAN TOUR

On June 18 and 19th, some of us had a very enjoyable tour of Canadian irrigation projects on the eastern tributaries, and headwaters of Battle Creek and the Frenchman River sponsored by the Milk River International Alliance. It was very interesting and informative. I extend a very big "thank you" to everyone that helped make it happen. My deep appreciation goes out to Rob Weibe of Sask Water, and Marv Cross from the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) for organizing the tour, and the Valley County Conservation District for administering a DNRC Irrigation Development Grant to cover attendee expenses. Regrettably, funding restraints limited the number of American attendees to 14, but it was money well spent.

SAINT MARY UPDATE

Contracts have been let and work should start soon on rehabilitation of the Saint Mary siphon tubes. Funding for the project came from a DNRC Renewable Resource Grant obtained by the Joint Board of Control, and water user assessment dollars. Sherburne Lake will be low enough by mid-August, to allow crews to begin working on Sherburne Dam.

All we need to do is spend the rest of the winter praying for heavy snowpack in the mountains to fill her back up.

MRIA RECEIVES FUNDING

The MRIA 319 grant was finally approved. The Advisory Council and Technical Advisory Group met, and will be meeting again soon, to chart the way for the MRIA and to hire a coordinator. A general meeting was also held on August 15 from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. at the First State Bank Community Room in Malta. As always, all MRIA meetings are open to everyone, and please bring your thoughts and ideas!

Irrigators Tour Saskatchewan Projects

By Rob Wiebe, Sask Water

Tour members gather at demonstration site on the Canadian Irrigation Tour.

On June 18 and 19, 2001, more than twenty irrigators from Montana and Saskatchewan toured irrigation reservoir storage, and irrigation projects along the Eastern Tributaries of the Milk River Basin in Saskatchewan. Fourteen Montana irrigators from the Milk River Basin and two DNRC representatives gathered in Chinook and Havre to travel to Consul, Saskatchewan to begin the tour. Eight local Saskatchewan irrigators and representatives from Sask Water and Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) joined them. Following lunch, Sask Water and PFRA presented an overview of the tour, the projects, and the monitoring systems used to comply with the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909.

The tour included stops at the Vidora (2600 acres) and Consul (3000 acres) irrigation projects located in the Battle Creek watershed. Participants were introduced to the unique Cypress Lake, which is able to capture, as well as release, water from both Frenchman and Battle Creek drainages. This year, low water levels on this reservoir required water destined for Battle Creek projects to be pumped by two large diesel powered axial flow pumps. Following dinner at the picturesque Spring Valley Guest Ranch near Ravenscrag, the day ended with the group attending an irrigation demonstration sponsored by the Irrigation Crop Diversification Corporation. The group spent the night at the rustic cabins located in the Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park, the headwaters for the Frenchman River.

The second day began with PFRA providing a historical overview of the development of water supply works in the Milk River, Saskatchewan area. Later, the focus was on Frenchman River projects beginning at the Eastend (2900 acres) project, including the Eastend Reservoir, a crop demonstration site, and an explanation of the area geology. The Val Marie (7,000 acres) project and reservoirs rounded out the day and concluded the tour. Effective water management begins with understanding the physical characteristics of the supply systems and cultural aspects of those who use the water. By all accounts the tour can be considered a success. American and Canadian irrigators were introduced to, and became more familiar with, the physical irrigation works. More importantly irrigators and water managers, from both sides of the border had an opportunity to better understand and discuss each other's needs for water. ✓

Cypress Lake controls realeases ot the Frenchman River and Battle Creek.

Tour members at demonstration site.

Eastend Dam near Eastend, Saskatchewan on the Frenchman River.

(Canal Efficency Study Continued from Page 2)

two years. The first year we would learn how the canal systems operate, determine an initial water budget for each district, and identify likely system improvements. The second year would be used to confirm information collected the first year, and collect additional information for specific system improvements. The door was left open to continue into a third year if needed.

It was shaping up to be one of the driest years on record, compounded by almost no carry-over water in Fresno, Nelson, and Sherburne Reservoirs because of dry conditions last year. From the start, we knew that collecting canal efficiency data this year was going to be tough. Milk River Project water allocations were originally set at 0.6 of a foot per acre in May, and then cut to just 0.4 of a foot per acre in June. The conditions couldn't be much worse for examining "typical" operations of the canal systems. On the bright side, water users were paying attention, realizing the importance of good water measurement for efficient canal operation and equitable distribution of water.

Cottonwoods thrive along the Milk River, such as this one near Chinook, which measures roughly 31 feet in circumference.

The short water supply and irrigation season provided a backhanded benefit, giving us an opportunity to get ready for next year. Many of the canals and laterals in the valley are too flat to use traditional water measurement devices, which makes accurate water measurement difficult and unreliable. Several steps have been taken that provide a means of collecting data for the study, as well as providing management tools for the ditch riders. New electronic water measurement gages will be installed to more accurately measure water diversions by individual canals. Staff gages are being placed at the head of most laterals, which allows existing gates to be used for water measurement and accounting on each lateral. Canal and lateral spillways will be monitored to measure operational spills. Data loggers will be placed on some of the laterals to record water flows where possible. By measuring and tracking water flow, we hope to develop an accurate water budget for each district.

In many ways a water budget is similar to a household budget. For a household budget you track how much money you made, then try to figure out where it all went. Well, a water budget is quite similar. You need to know: how much water each canal diverted from the river; how that water is divided up into laterals or smaller canals; how much is being delivered to farmers; how much is spilled; and how much is lost to seepage and evaporation. A water budget is important for determining what types of improvements will be most effective and economical.

One factor that became obvious this short water year was that there was a large amount of water released from Fresno Dam, that could not be accounted for. The Canal Efficiency Study will examine river transportation losses and determine how river operations can be improved.

I can guess what you're all thinking: "What's going to make this study any different from all those other Milk River studies?" Well, I give no guarantees, but from the start we have had the cooperation of all the irrigation districts, the Milk River Joint Board of Control, the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, and Reclamation. It is our hope that with everyone's support and working together, we can define real solutions for improving the use of our limited water supplies identified in the study. ✓

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Blaine County and MRIA Begin Watershed Assesment Project

By Paul Azevedo, DNRC

On July 2, 2001, the Blaine County CD and MRIA received "notice to proceed" from the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) with work on the Milk River Watershed Assessment Project (Project). The goals of the Project include:
1) Complete a natural resource assessment to provide baseline data to be used as a foundation for future watershed planning efforts;
2) Implement irrigation water management practices to improve natural resource conditions in the basin;
3) Provide information and education for Milk River Basin residents.

Primary funding for the Project will come from a $74,000 "319-grant" that the MRIA applied for last fall. The Project will take about two years to complete.

The MRIA will also be receiving additional funding assistance from Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). DNRC has entered into agreements with the U.S. EPA, BLM, and Reclamation to pass approximately $44,000 on to the basin. These funds are intended to assist with compiling baseline data, support the development of information and education programs, [illegible] with general watershed proje[illegible] address water resources, and provide administrative support for the MRIA.

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Your Future Depends On This Pipe

By John Tubbs, DNRC

Back from a recent inspection of the repair of the St. Mary's Siphon, it really hit home. The entire Milk River watershed in Montana is dependant on two pipes that are nearly 100 years old and are in a failed condition. This summer ninety-seven percent of all the water that flowed in the Milk River originated in a separate river basin fed by the snow pack of Glacier National Park. That's right, the Milk River watershed only produced three percent of the flow this summer.

The Siphons shown in the picture on page 2 are twin 90 inch barrels that carry diverted water across the St. Mary's River and eventually into the North Fork of the Milk River. DNRC funded a grant to repair a portion of these siphons in 1999. A second grant was just issued for further repairs. The good news for the Milk is that this aging system that our great grandfathers built still works; but, for how long?

As a grant and loan manager for the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), I review hundreds of grant propos-

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The 2001 Water Year - A Year to Remember

By Mike Dailey, DNRC

Folks in the Milk River basin went into this irrigation season with roughly 50 percent of normal storage, 70 percent of normal snowpack, and already dry conditions. The water supply situation only got worse as the initial forecasted irrigation allotment of 0.9 acre-feet per acre (ac-ft/ac) was reduced to 0.4 ac-ft/ac, but then raised to 0.6 ac-ft/ ac.

What did this mean for the Milk River irrigators? It meant a lot of acres went without water, especially in the upper two-thirds of the basin. According to Hugh

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Happy Holidays

Representatives on the Milk River JBC include the following:

Kay Blatter	Chairman	Fort Belknap Irr. Dist.	**Casey Kienenberger**	Member	Malta Irr. Dist.
Hugh Brookie	Vice-Chairman	Malta Irr. Dist.	**Ralph Snider**	Member	Harlem Irr. Dist.
Melvin Novak	Secretary	Glasgow Irr. Dist.	**Bruce Anderson**	Member	Paradise Valley Irr. Dist.
Lee Cornwell	Member	Glasgow Irr. Dist.	**Brad Tilleman**	Member	Zurich Irr. Dist.
Jack Gist	Member	Alfalfa Valley Irr. Dist.	**Steve Tremblay**	Member	Dodson Irr. Dist.

(Your Future Continued from Page 1)

als each year. As a result I am aware of projects throughout the state. Milk River irrigation districts and municipalities have submitted a number of grant and loan applications to DNRC. Some of these projects represent significant investments in the infrastructure needed to beneficially use available water.

Even with the investment that local irrigation districts, municipalities, and state agencies have made, the big project is still on the horizon.

Milk River water users need to ask the question: Can our economy survive if we allow the 100-year-old infrastructure that delivers our water to simply fall apart? No action is a choice. In the case of the Milk River, it has serious consequences – no water.

It will take the partnership of all water users in the basin, municipal, tribal, and irrigation districts to raise the capital necessary to rehabilitate the aging structures that deliver water to the Milk River valley. Irrigation districts must team up with municipalities and tribal governments to take control of their destinies.

The partnership must also include the state and federal governments. Without significant federal grants and state grants, local governments will never be able to afford the repairs.

When it comes to state grants, no existing program has the resources to address the needs of the Milk River. A new funding mechanism must be established to develop an investment fund.

As far as the Bureau of Reclamation is concerned, Milk River water users need to thank them for keeping the water flowing. From my inspection of the projects we are working on, it is amazing that a few federal employees are able to keep the wheels from falling off. The Milk River system is huge and complex. I know that people just can't grasp what they do. I really had no idea until I inspected the system first hand.

Twin Syphon Barrels that carry St. Mary's water to the Milk River.

On the other hand, the Bureau can be faulted when it comes to the status of the infrastructure itself. For many reasons, the Bureau has not mustered the resources necessary to begin to address the aging infrastructure of the Milk River system. In government, we call this deferred maintenance. The Bureau is conducting studies now, however, the focus is on the settlement of the Fort Belknap Water Right.

It's time for local water users to get active, to take this project on as your own. With local, grassroots support, state agencies will work with you to seek both federal and state funds to engineer solutions and to replace and repair aging infrastructure.

The beginnings are in place. The irrigation districts have formed a Joint Board of Control. This organization will allow the districts to act in a coordinated fashion. The Milk River Alliance represents water users and other stakeholders. This organization will be critical to addressing the issues.

This issue is not just an irrigation problem. The entire economy of the Milk River is at stake. From the irrigation field to the city, sportsman and cattleman, tribal and non-tribal, everyone needs water. ✓

Upcoming Events

2002 Water Management Workshop
February 4-8, 2002
Denver, CO
Limited Scholarships Available
Call Brent Esplin, USBR for details
(406) 247-7489

Montana Water Resource Association
Annual Meeting
Fairmont Hot Springs
January 29 & 30, 2002
Call Mike Murphy for details

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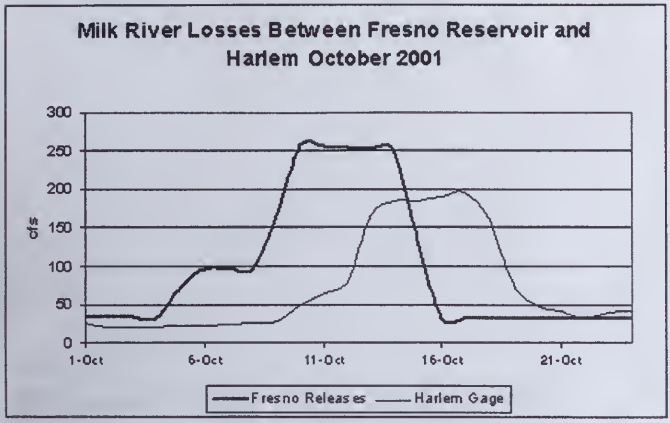

Brookie, President of Malta Irrigation District, where only 1/3rd of the fields in his district got irrigated, "We didn't have spring rain to make it easier— it killed us."

Delivering water to Malta Irrigation District was a challenge. Not enough of the water released from Fresno Reservoir reached the Dodson Diversion Dam for effective irrigation. Scott Guenthner, with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation noted, "we were in an impossible situation, there simply was not enough water."

During peak summer releases from Fresno Reservoir, approximately 300 cfs or 25 percent of the released storage could not be accounted for by the time it reached the Harlem Gaging Station. In October, the Bureau transferred 5,000 ac-ft from Fresno to Nelson Reservoir and measured the flows to determine where the water losses occurred. A peak discharge of 250 cfs was released from Fresno Reservoir. The peak flow at the USGS Harlem Gage Station was only 195 cfs - a loss of 22 percent, which is similar to what we saw during the irrigation season (Please see graph). Peak flows at the Dodson South Canal diversion were about 140 cfs, or 56% of the flow released at Fresno. The losses were attributed to the flows entering into the shallow groundwater adjacent to the stream bank, and this is part of the reason deliveries to Malta were so difficult.

Despite the water management problems, last summer's drought brought us some bright spots and taught us some important lessons. The Milk River Project Joint Board of Control worked well together in distributing the available water supplies. Also, luck of the draw brought 10 ½ inches of rain to the Glasgow area during June and July, taking some of

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Hydrologic Technician Deb Pankratz measures flows near Malta on a chilly day in October during a storage transfer from Fresno Reservoir to Nelson Reservoir.

Milk River Reservoir Comparison

October 1, 2000 and October 1, 2001

Storage Facility	October 1, 2000	October 1, 2001
Sherburne Reservoir	5,975 acre-feet	5,142 acre-feet
Fresno Reservoir	33,460 acre-feet	20,674 acre-feet
Nelson Reservoir (active)	7,299 acre-feet	14,820 acre-feet

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

MEET JIM THOMPSON

By Mike Dailey, DNRC

After interviewing a number of qualified candidates, the Milk River International Alliance (MRIA) hired Jim Thompson of Fort Peck as their new watershed coordinator.

Originally from Mandan, North Dakota, Jim received an associate of arts degree from Bismarck State College, and a B.S degree. from University of North Dakota in Biology. After serving two tours of duty as a Medical evacuation Pilot in the US Marine Corp, Jim returned to school to earn an M.S. degree in Natural Resource Management from North Dakota State University. In 1981 he went into business for himself, establishing the first environmental consulting firm in Bismarck. Over the last 20 years, he has worked with numerous federal, state, county, and private landowners to resolve natural resource management issues.

His experience in projects related to natural resource management include project manager for the development of North Dakota's 208 Water Quality Plan, and project management in the development of the state's Devils Lake Basin Plan. According to Jim, in 1994 he was looking for the best place to live in Montana and found a home in Fort Peck.

The MRIA is fortunate to have found such an experienced and capable watershed coordinator in Jim. Over the next two years, his primary responsibility will be to oversee completion of the MRIA's Milk River Watershed Assessment Project. Jim will attempt to visit with each of the conservation districts and irrigation districts in the basin this fall or early winter. Jim can be reached at (406) 367-5405 or by email at bkrath@nemontel.net. Please say hello to Jim if you see him in the basin.

Coordinator's Corner

By Jim Thompson

Well, after working two weeks as the Milk River International Alliance Coordinator, I feel I need one of those hats that have four bills and says on the front "Which way am I going?" One quickly realizes there are a number of significant issues within the basin and there are an increasing number of demands being placed on the Milk River. Throw in the weather and my goodness!

I would suppose some out there are wondering just where am I going and what am I doing along the way. It is a simple proposition that the more pertinent information one has, the better chances one has of making good decisions; and there is a lot of good existing information out there. Simply put, most of my time will be spent getting that information to local decision-makers for their evaluation and recommendations. Throughout this process the Alliance has emphasized two guidelines, "think watershed" and "think local management". I look forward to meeting and working with many of you and hope and trust this process will assist in addressing basin issues.

A friend of mine told me a story awhile back. It seems that due to the dry weather the only water on his farm was a small puddle in the middle of his irrigation ditch. He had about thirty or so geese and they were raising heck trying to use that puddle.

If you don't hear from me in the near future you'll probably hear over the news that the body of Jim Thompson was found in a small puddle along the Milk. The drowning is a mystery but it was noted he had numerous goose tracks on his back.

Look forward to seeing all of you,

Jim

Alfalfa Irrigation District

General Information

Total Acres:	3,800
Number of Farms:	24
Water Price(s):	$13 per acre
Diversion:	Lohman Dam
Miles of canals and laterals:	22

Board Members

President:	Jack Gist
Member:	Max Maddox
Member:	Bruce Butcher

Number of employees

Part Time:	2 (Seasonal)

Questions

Q: How does Alfalfa Valley ID charge water users?

A: Assessed with county real estate taxes through the Treasurer based on acres irrigated.

Q: What types of crops are grown within the district and approximate percentages for each crop?

A: 70% alfalfa hay and 30% grain.

Q: How does the district ensure a fair distribution of water?

A: The ditch rider measures water at turnouts.

Q: What is the district's policy when a user is observed wasting water and how is the policy enforced?

A: The water user is required to turn off the diversion and has to reorder with a delay of 3 days.

Q: What recent improvements have been made to the district's system?

A: Ditch cleaning, ditch lining and increased water measurement.

Q: What is the single biggest factor that could improve irrigation in the basin?

A: A more adequate/reliable water supply.

Q: How do district members envision the basin 10 years from now?

A: More water measurement and accounting taking place. Much depends of future compacts and water settlements with Indian tribes.

Alfalfa Valley Irrigation District Rider Dennis Kleinjan, left, and president Jack Gist discuss the merits of water measurement.

Did You Know....

Thousands of years ago, large glaciers pushed the Missouri River south, and now the Milk River occupies portions of that ancient Missouri River channel and valley.

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the pressure off of Nelson Reservoir.

This October, Milk River irrigators are entering the winter months with 6,090 acre-feet less stored water than last year, which bodes ominous for next year's irrigation season (see table on page 3). Perhaps, by applying some of the lessons we learned this year, we can lessen water shortfalls nest summer. According to Guenthner, "We learned some important lessons." When asked what should be done different next year if faced with a similar drought situation, he reflected, "We got held-up on starting flows into the St. Mary Canal. Next year, we need to get the Canal prepped and St. Mary water moving into the Milk River as early as possible. We also need to increase flow measurement for more accurate accounting." He went on to say "I liked the idea of the irrigation districts staggering their starts, but in hindsight, I would deliver both the first and second allotments of water to the lower districts for one continuous irrigation, rather than making a second smaller delivery later in the season. The split irrigation delivery was acceptable to the upper districts, but was impractical for providing water to the lower districts."

Nelson Reservoir at its peak storage during early May. The normal water level for this time of year is visible on the Nelson South Canal outlet structure.

Dry years like this underscores the need for good water management. Several irrigation districts in the project are working toward improving their ability to manage available water supplies. Increased and improved water measurement is the first important step. Let's hope next year is more forgiving, but we need to remember the lessons we learned in 2001. ✓

If you have ideas for articles or news items,

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